Abstract:
This portfolio documents two teaching innovations and strategies intended to address two recurring learning challenges for students in an introductory communication course: difficulty developing connections among authors and concepts and struggles applying course material to personal experiences. The portfolio includes an introduction to the course and explanation of the challenges; instructions for each assignment; samples of student work; and reflection on the outcomes, benefits, and drawbacks for each assignment.

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# COURSE PORTFOLIO CONTENTS

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“Introduction to Communication and Culture” (CMCL C-205) provides a theoretical introduction to the three areas of study in Indiana University’s Communication and Culture Department: rhetoric and public culture, film and media studies, and performance and ethnography studies. I served as one of three primary instructors for the course. The course fulfills a general “Arts and Humanities” requirement for most departments and it is a required course for communication and culture majors and serves as a prerequisite for several upper-level courses in the department. The following description from the course syllabus provides a general overview of the course:

Many of us tend to think of the process of communication as going something like this: (1) We get an idea; (2) we put that idea into words or images or actions; (3) we send those words or images or actions to another person; and (4) that other person decodes the words or images or actions to find the idea that we put into them.

In this view, “communication” functions like a container for ideas, or a handy way to transmit bits of data from one place to another. This way of thinking focuses our attention not on the “communication” but on the ideas it contains. The words or images or actions we use to transport the information are of no particular interest. In fact, from this point of view, the very best or ideal form of communication would not call attention to itself at all. In this view, communication should be transparent—a clear, concise, and simple conduit through which ideas and data travel from one human brain to another.

When we think about communication this way, we seek advice and training in how to improve communication skills and solve communication problems in all areas of life: the business world, family relationships, significant others, etc. This view of communication tells us to strive for perfect communication and encourages us to “Eliminate static;” “Choose words that reflect your true self;” “Use short sentences and common words; and “Always say what you mean!”

This course is designed to challenge these assumptions. Instead, this course proposes that no communication technology, no amount of free expression, and no degree of faithfulness to the standard rules of grammar will ever fully describe the true world or wholly convey your real “inner self.” This course urges you to see that communication is never merely a neutral container for data and ideas that are created somewhere else. Rather, data and ideas cannot exist outside of communication. Communication constructs ideas and communication is selective and deceptive—and these are good things. Human communication does not make data and ideas portable—it makes them possible.

This course has three primary goals:

1. First, it will introduce you to the unique perspective provided by the Department of Communication & Culture. Our department brings together scholars with interests in Rhetoric and Public Culture, Performance and Ethnographic Studies, and Film and Media, and this course emphasizes some of the ways that these fields of study intersect.
2. Second, this course will prepare you for the work expected in higher-level courses in the department and acquaint you with some of the habits of thought and methods of study that will characterize those courses.

3. Finally, and most importantly, I believe strongly that citizens who learn to understand communication in the way presented in this course are infinitely better equipped for contemporary, everyday life than those who think of communication as merely a way to transport data.

STUDENTS

44 students completed the spring 2009 semester (52 enrolled initially). The student composition included one freshman, 21 sophomores, 12 juniors, and 10 seniors. Just under half of the students (21) were CMCL majors and the others were a broad mix of business, journalism, history, telecommunications, East Asian studies, and various other disciplines.

CLASS FORMAT

The course readings include scholarly texts (journal articles, book excerpts) from philosophy, cultural studies, and communication theory as well as “easier” readings for concept application. Students often find the level of complexity high due to difficult vocabulary and jargon. But more difficult for students are the new concepts and ways of thinking about communication that the course introduces. Due to the complexity, each class period includes time for lecture in order to introduce the key concepts and ideas from each reading. Each class also includes opportunities for discussion and application to allow students to play with and practice course concepts and develop connections among course authors.
PORTFOLIO OBJECTIVES

The blend of CMCL majors and non-majors as well as the range of student level (freshmen through seniors) poses numerous pedagogical challenges in Introduction to Communication and Culture, especially given the newness and complexity of the theories and readings. This course portfolio documents my endeavors to address two principle challenges I have identified during four semesters teaching this course:

1. **Developing complex concept connections:** One of the course objectives is to help students explore relationships among authors and concepts and put the theories in conversation with one another in order to work toward more complex analysis and understanding of communication practice. But students tend to keep different theories and concepts compartmentalized and they have difficulty building complex connections and intersections among readings and concepts.

2. **Applying concepts to personal experience:** Another course objective is to help students gain insights into how communication practice and theory inform and impact their everyday lives, attitudes, identities, and so on. Students, however, experience troubles translating and applying the theory to their daily experiences.

In response to these challenges, I designed two assignments for use in the first month of the semester that would allow practice in concept development and application and set a precedent for a way of thinking I hoped to develop more fully throughout the semester. The following two sections document these early assignments. For each assignment, the course portfolio provides:

- An overview that frames the assignment goals and objectives
- Assignment instructions (as provided to students)
- Assignment assessment (including sample assignments and student feedback)
- Analysis and reflection on the impact and outcome of the assignment
BACKGROUND

We have read short excerpts from Plato and Isocrates together because they represent somewhat opposite viewpoints about communication, rhetoric, and truth. Plato’s views on communication and rhetoric fall in line more with ways of thinking related to the “standard view” or “transmission model” of communication. But Isocrates seems to see communication as something much more significant. Their “argument” over the importance and role of communication and rhetoric has carried on since 5th century B.C.E. until today, and this argument is a core foundation for our class.

INSTRUCTIONS

This assignment should include the following three things:

1. In your own words, summarize Plato’s view on rhetoric and what we should (or shouldn’t) use communication to do.

2. Do the same for Isocrates—summarize how he wants us to think about and use communication.

3. Explain whose position you agree with more and why?

In the spirit of Plato’s style of writing, write your response as a conversation among Plato, Isocrates, and you. How would their conversation (or argument) play out as they discuss how to think about communication and what would you have to say to Plato and Isocrates about these ideas?

Feel free to play around with this conversation. For example, imagine that new technology allows you to message and chat online with ancient authors. Or create a scene if you like: the three of you strike up a conversation on the subway or everyone is stuck in an elevator. Or have all the “actors” discuss communication in relation to an example such as a movie, a controversial issue, etc. … or just have everyone talk like in Plato’s Gorgias.

If you’re not a playwright at heart, don’t worry—I won’t evaluate these based on creative artistry. Nevertheless, push yourself to do something you may not be used to. I’ve listed the key components that should appear in the conversation above. That said, a response that simply lists each person once (“Plato: … Isocrates: … Student: …”) with one or two sentences for each will not fulfill the expectation of creating a thoughtful conversation about communication.
ASSESSMENT

This section includes four samples of student work beginning with C-level work and ending with A-level work. The samples are unaltered with the exception of standardizing the formatting and eliminating student names for anonymity. The comment box preceding each sample includes notes and reflections on the work. Following the student samples, the portfolio includes selected student responses to an anonymous survey about the assignment.

STUDENT SAMPLE 1: C-LEVEL WORK

The following response is sparse on specific details and seems to get lost in the scenario rather than working carefully with the authors’ ideas about communication. The response also misrepresents some of course concepts the class drew out of Plato’s Gorgias. The student voice in this conversation is also underdeveloped; the student seems to agree with an oversimplified version of both perspectives and then simply repeats general statements from class notes.

Two nerdy middle school boys are in the cafeteria glancing towards a very cute girl in their English class. The girl offered to proof read Isocrates assignment. The assignment is to write a letter to someone using the proper format. Isocrates chooses to write a love letter confessing his love for the girl. He hopes she figures out the meaning of the letter is geared towards her. Plato thinks the idea is stupid and the letter won’t have any effect on the girl. (Secretly he is jealous.)

Plato: That letter is only a series of words that don’t truly mean anything.

Isocrates: But my words are delivering a message.

Plato: Exactly! The purpose of communication is to send messages, it has nothing to do with meaning.

Isocrates: That is NOT what I meant! I have the power to speak will and my words are delivering a message with meaning.

Plato: You are creating a stage for “flattery.” You’re giving her a false impression.

Isocrates: All I want her to do is proof read my letter and fall in love with me.

Plato: Communication doesn’t tell what things actually mean it’s just a mode of transportation for the message.

Isocrates: Speech is the most powerful tool we have in sharing ideas and creating unity. I want her to share her ideas with me. (Pause) Plus you’re just jealous because she offered to read my letter and not yours.

Plato: So what if I am?

(Girl approaches with neither of the boys noticing)

Student1: Excuse me boys … communication is both something that allows us to send messages and have a meaning behind it. We can use it to persuade others. I think communication has a sense of togetherness. (Pause) And I have a crush on you, too, Isocrates.
Isocrates: You heard our conversation?!

Student1: Yes and I can’t wait to read your letter and learn the meaning behind it.

Isocrates: *(stunned in awe)* Wow.

Plato: *(pouting with jealousy)* Maybe I should change my ways.

Isocrates: Haha!! I told you it would work.

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**STUDENT SAMPLE 2: B-LEVEL WORK**

Compared to the response above, this conversation presents a more careful discussion between the two authors in question. Once again, the student’s voice only appears briefly in the end without much participation in the conversation about communication, but in this sample the student more decisively explains his/her position in the debate.

**Setting:** Watching President Obama give his inaugural address after being sworn in.

Isocrates: Don’t you think Barack is going to be a great President with all the ideas he has to get our country back where it needs to be and fix all of our problems?

Plato: Don’t be fooled Isocrates, Obama is all talk.

Isocrates: Why Plato, whatever do you mean?

Plato: Obama uses Rhetoric in a deceptive way to try to get votes but now that he doesn’t need to impress people as much he will do what is in his own best interest.

Isocrates: I think you are dead wrong on this one my dear friend Plato.

Plato: What have you got to disprove me Isocrates?

Isocrates: Obama might have good rhetoric skills, but that does not mean he is not an honest person like you would lead me to believe.

Plato: You don’t think he really cares about the people do you? He is using communication to his advantage and not for the betterment of others.

Isocrates: I disagree. I think he cares deeply about the people. I think he uses communication to get his message across that he wants to improve our country.

Plato: It’s all deception I tell you.

Isocrates: How can you say that? You can not underestimate the power of rhetoric to change our country for the good. Where do you think we would be without the power to speak and persuade people?

Plato: I think that although you would like to believe it is for the good of everyone it is really for the good of the elite few.

Student2: Allow me to jump in here and give my input on this matter.

Plato: Who are you?
Student2: I am a college student who has studies the issues and become very inspired by what President Obama has both said and done. I have also taken a class on rhetoric before.

Plato: So who do you side with then young fellow?

Student2: I side with Isocrates. I think the power of rhetoric in communication is very important. There are very few things in the world today that have not been created by rhetoric and communication through persuasion. Our laws and the formation of cities would not be so without rhetoric and communication.

Isocrates: Thanks for the support; we have to convince Plato he is wrong on this very issue.

Plato: Well I can see we are not really going to agree on this issue. I think only time will tell if Obama can carry through on some of the promises he made during his campaign.

Student2: Ok then it is settled. For now we agree to disagree on the issue.

STUDENT SAMPLE 3: A-LEVEL WORK

The following student responses carefully summarized, paraphrased, and integrated key points and tensions in the debate over the scope and function of communication. Each student definitively inserted her / his own voice and perspective into each of the following dialogues as well.

IsOcRaT3z (5:17:49 PM): Heyy Plato! What’s up man?

Auto Response from PhilosopherPlato (5:17:49 PM): Out Philosophizin’...

PhilosopherPlato (5:25:31 PM): Hi Isocrates! Not much here, I’m just sitting here wondering how anyone could be so stupid to believe in the merits of rhetoric after an argument with Gorgias. What’s up with you?

IsOcRaT3z (5:26:23 PM): Not much just chatting with my friend, a student at Indiana University studying communication, about the importance of rhetoric so I’m going to add her to our chat too.

Student3 (5:26:56 PM): Hi Plato! Glad to get your input on the importance of rhetoric too. I’ve got a killer exam coming up in my communications class.

IsOcRaT3z (5:27:23 PM): Speaking of such, Plato, what’s not to love about rhetoric?

IsOcRaT3z (5:30:35 PM): Are thoughts and arguments not blessings? Other creatures certainly don’t have the gift of language as we do!

PhilosopherPlato (5:35:29 PM): Language may be a gift but rhetoric is not! Perhaps you are confused as Gorgias was on what rhetoric is...

Student3 (5:35:56 PM): Wait, what? I don’t think this is on the exam…

IsOcRaT3z (5:36:07 PM): Then please Plato why don’t you explain it to me and the student studying communication theories in the 21st century.

PhilosopherPlato (5:38:16 PM): Well what do you think it is?
IsOcRaT3z (5:43:17 PM): Well I think it is a craft. A craft that guides our actions and is used most by those who are wisest. For nothing in intelligence can happen without speech.

Student3 (5:44:56 PM): I believe communication makes everything in life possible as well without it we would not be able to live among one another, as a human that’s just impossible.

IsOcRaT3z (5:45:28 PM): Similarly, I also believe it has been instrumental in developing most or all institutions that benefit us like cities, laws and art.

IsOcRaT3z (5:46:15 PM): Language is essential for laws which give us order and allow us to live with each other.

Student3 (5:35:56 PM): That is exactly what I was thinking. That without communication there would be no order and utter chaos.

PhilosopherPlato (5:47:11 PM): You both say that rhetoric is a craft but I contend that it is not.

PhilosopherPlato (5:51:06 PM): It was not the words that were instrumental in developing our institutions it was the thoughts behind them making language a tool and rhetoric a flattery.

IsOcRaT3z (5:56:32 PM): A flattery? But communication allows us to educate. The better someone speaks the better the quality of their soul and the wiser they are determined to be.

Student3 (5:56:46 PM): I don’t know Plato… I’ve been studying that you cannot study communication in such a linear way. Language is too complex to think in such historic forms like so. It is almost impossible to transmit straight facts concisely without any biasness.

PhilosopherPlato (5:56:56 PM): Yes, but communication is not the same as rhetoric.

PhilosopherPlato (6:00:38 PM): Rhetoric is a part of flattery similar to cookery, cosmetics, and sophistry (the teaching of rhetoric) all of which are more concerned with what seems good or what feels pleasurable

PhilosopherPlato (6:01:52 PM): Medicine, gymnastics, legislation, and justice are similar to philosophy. They are better for soul and body because they are more concerned with the truth and what is actually good.

Student3 (6:04:41 PM): Well I don’t know about all of that, what about the part of rhetoric that is positive like motivation? Motivations are needed by humans to strive to be better and to try to achieve their goals. How else would the marathon runners in your favorite Olympic game become so motivated without his coach’s motivational speech?! Communication and rhetoric is complex, Plato, and your theory of straight, concise facts just seems too idealistic to be the right way to view communication.

IsOcRaT3z (6:06:56 PM): Hum... I see both of your views. This has been an enlightening dispute on rhetoric. However, arguments are just like other arts and we shouldn’t contradict ourselves. We shouldn’t close our ears to argument for arguing is a form of educating oneself.

PhilosopherPlato (6:08:43 PM): Perhaps... but forgive me g2g to catch a plane to Crete. Ttyl!

IsOcRaT3z (6:09:26 PM): Ok have a safe trip. C ya Plato

Student3 (6:09:26 PM): It was great to get both of your opinions. I’m sure this will help me keep my mind open for the test. Plato, I hope I did not offend you by siding with Isocrates that Rhetoric is
important. I greatly enjoyed hearing both of your theories and I look forward to hearing more from both of you later. Buh Bye!

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**STUDENT SAMPLE 4: A-LEVEL WORK**

One fine day Student4 is throwing a baseball up against a fence in an empty field. Isocrates and Plato are riding their bikes by and see Student4 and decided to ask if he would like to play catch with them since they had their gloves with them. While playing catch in a triangular formation Student4 provokes a conversation.

**Student4:** So uh … what do you guys think about rhetoric?

*(Long pause with smirks)*

**Isocrates:** Well Student4 I think we should recognize the value of communication and rhetoric as being essential to life. Without speech intelligence would be hindered greatly. I would also like to point out that through speech we can dispute, correct, and appraise the wise. This inevitably leads to growth as a people.

**Student4:** Interesting. One thing though …

**Isocrates:** What’s that?

**Student4:** It sounds as if you speak of intelligence carried through speech interchangeably with wisdom. I study Sign Language and have come to realize that intelligence is not only transmitted through speech. I just feel your statement seems a bit narrow.

**Plato:** That’s a good point Student4. I believe we shouldn’t cater to people’s desires, but rather promote the real good. Even if that means not catering to a large majorities perspective that speech, and how you speak, signifies intelligence.

**Isocrates:** I see what you’re saying Student4. *(Throws the ball to Student4 a little faster than usual)* My main point still stands through any languages that we as a people would be no different from animals if we didn’t have this great faculty of communication.

**Plato:** This is true a lot of good has come from communication. But what is the motive behind all those conversations, arguments, and lectures that has brought us as a people to where we are today?

**Student4:** I would hope to be for betterment of mankind. That sounds noble.

**Plato:** I think that a pursuit after the real good, such as the “betterment of mankind, is the right motive. There is dangerous ground though of those who would use their “faculty” for their own flattery and self-promotion that would be out of a wrong motive. This I would disagree with sternly.

*(Plato accidently throws a curve ball and it hits Isocrates in shoulder)*

**Isocrates:** OUCH!

**Plato:** Sorry my friend, I got carried away with the energy I was feeling while speaking.

*(Student4 chuckles)*
Isocrates: Control yourself Plato! Now, the only question then I would have for you Plato is how do you determine “real good?” Who knows of what real good is and who gets to deem it what it is?

Plato: There, my friend, I do not have an answer.

Student4: Maybe another day boys. There are some things in life that will not be answered and other things that it is unwise to quarrel over. As far as to answering your questions Isocrates I would much rather reflect on if we are even pursuing to find the “real good.” It’s getting late lets head home.

Plato: Yes yes I’m old and tired I’m going straight to bed.

Isocrates: I second that motion.

Student4: Guys, its 7:30pm….

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**STUDENT FEEDBACK: CONCEPT CONNECTION ASSIGNMENT**

At the end of the semester, I asked students to reflect on and evaluate the learning outcomes for several assignments throughout the semester. Most students evaluated this assignment favorably and reported that it forced them to work with the material in a way that firmly reinforced the concepts. The following comments represent some of the positive reports of student learning (emphasis added in several responses where students explicitly mentioned an intended learning outcome).

“This was probably my best assignment and I really liked it because I had to become three or four different people along with myself and had to talk as if I was each of them so I was able to apply my understandings of each author on there.”

“This was my favorite assignment because it really helped me connect the authors and simply voice their opinions in an understandable way.”

“When writing about authors it helped me understand them better because I actually had to look further into the passages and compare.”

“This was good to see how the authors intersected with each other. I also thought the assignment was a lot of fun.”

“At first I approached the assignment with dread. I’m not usually used to writing dialogues (or being creative, for that matter) on assignments, but the CMCL department stresses that kind of learning. I appreciated the work I put into the assignment, and I really was happy with what I was able to teach myself by re-reading the texts looking for quotes to implement into the dialogue.”

“It forced me to learn how to compare the material and thus give me a greater understanding of the concepts.”

“I did this twice. This helped me map out what each author thought and what they thought about each other’s ideas.”

“It helped me to further analyze and interpret the authors and to compare them to one another.”
“It took me a couple chances to get it right since it was the first assignment and had to think deep about it but it helped with my understanding.”

Despite predominantly positive feedback, several students disliked the creative aspect of this assignment and expressed a preference for a more standard mode of summarizing information. (emphasis added)

“This assignment challenged me in a way that I did not find it the most helpful as maybe a summary would have been.”

“I didn’t mind writing the dialogue but sometime I felt I could have made better connections if a short paper was an option.”

“I am undecided because it was really hard to do. I felt like I was making up some mumble chumble stuff. But for those who got the hang of it would help because you are talking it out even though it is amongst yourself.”

“The style of the project over-shadowed the content of the project. It took away from learning the material because the focus was on the style of project.”

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

One motive for creating this assignment so early in the semester was to “teach the conflicts” and “engage[e] students in the conversations, questions, and debates central to” communication and cultural studies. ¹ I intended that this assignment not only help students explore the foundations of an ever-present disciplinary debate, but also force students to insert themselves into the debate and begin to think about how they understood communication to impact their own everyday experiences.

I anticipated that this assignment (due during the third week of classes) would be challenging because it asked students not simply to repeat or summarize information but to synthesize and evaluate the debate before the ideas had been explored fully in class. Therefore, I allowed students to resubmit their assignments after I provided an initial grade and assignment feedback so that they would have the opportunity to work with the concepts more carefully.

Student work on both the first and second submissions indicated that many students had worked closely with the texts in order to explore the conflicting views of communication and rhetoric. Compared to previous semesters at the same point in the semester, a greater number of students seemed able to explain with more detail the key tension that the class explores. Due to the apparent success of this assignment, I created a quiz later in the semester that asked students to integrate four different authors into a similar conversation.

Although my primary goal was to push students toward connecting disciplinary concepts and conversations, many responses directly related to the challenge I discuss in the next section: connecting concepts to personal experiences. For example, one sample above identified the debate

over rhetoric and communication in the discourse over political orators like Barack Obama. Several responses achieved this unintended outcome.

One challenge I did not anticipate was that despite the bolded instructions almost a quarter of the students turned in assignments that merely provided three short summary paragraphs—one paragraph summarizing Plato, one summarizing Isocrates, and one that explained the student’s position. In order to avoid a similar result I provided a sample assignment as a supplement to the instructions for the following assignment (included in the next section of the course portfolio).
BACKGROUND

Songs and song lyrics are important cultural messages that convey a certain way of thinking about communication whether we’re aware of that attitude or not. One objective for this class is to learn to pay attention to the many forms of communication and messages that impact us and shape our world and thoughts every day.

Lanham believes we should learn “to look at language in a certain way” and then practice a “rhetorical view” where our attention “fall[es], first and last if not always, on the verbal surface, on words not ideas.” (3)

Therefore, this assignment asks you to practice looking more carefully at the language in lyrics and think about the ideas and attitudes about communication that they create.

INSTRUCTIONS

First, pick a song that you believe represents some of the ways of thinking about communication that Lanham discusses (either the “serious premises” that we’ve related to the transmission model or a “rhetorical view” of communication).

Provide the lyrics for the song (or at least the relevant parts of lyrics) and then break down the song explaining which attitude(s) about communication the song conveys and why. As you explain and analyze the attitudes in the song use specific references to Lanham and your own summaries of these key ways of thinking about (or attitudes toward) communication.

EXAMPLE

I’ve provided an example on the following page to get you started. You do not have to mimic this format if another format works better for you.
Every day is so wonderful
And suddenly, I saw debris
Now and then, I get insecure
From all the pain, I’m so ashamed

I am beautiful no matter what they say
Words can’t bring me down
I am beautiful in every single way
Yes, words can’t bring me down
So don’t you bring me down today

To all your friends, you’re delirious
So consumed in all your doom
Trying hard to fill the emptiness
The piece is gone left the puzzle undone
That’s the way it is

You are beautiful no matter what they say
Words can’t bring you down
You are beautiful in every single way
Yes, words can’t bring you down
Don’t you bring me down today...

No matter what we do
No matter what they say
When the sun is shining through
Then the clouds won’t stay

And everywhere we go
The sun won’t always shine
But tomorrow will find a way
All the other times

It seems that the entire song tells us that words don’t matter—only the “Truth” matters. Words are either accurate or inaccurate descriptions of the “truth;” they are either “true” or “false.” Christina wants me to know that the “truth” is I’m beautiful regardless of what people say about me. As if words and communication don’t have anything to do with the truth.

Her message reminds me of Lanham’s “serious premises” of communication because she’s singing about a “central self” that seems to exist outside of any communication. The “reality” of this central self also exists outside of communication (a “referent reality [that] stands beyond words” [18]) so that no matter what people or culture say, no matter how we behave or perform, the natural and total truth is that I’m “beautiful”.

It’s as if she’s singing, “Don’t pay attention to rhetoric that convinces you you’re not beautiful because it’s not true!” Plato stressed this same attitude about communication.

On the other hand, this song doesn’t make any sense without a “rhetorical view.” If “words can’t bring me down” who’s to say they can cheer me up? If words didn’t matter, then why is Christina trying to convince people that they’re beautiful?

Lanham said that we cannot be free from rhetoric (8) and that “reality is what is accepted as reality.” (5) Even though the song tries to deny or ignore rhetoric, it uses rhetoric to persuade people to think in a certain way and to have a certain attitude. Christina uses rhetoric to create the reality and invent the truth that we’re beautiful.

She sings that a piece of the puzzle is gone and the “sun won’t always shine” but we still have to “find a way” to carry on. That’s what rhetoric helps us do. In a world of “contingent purpose, of perpetual cognitive dissonance, [and] plural orchestration” (7), rhetoric helps us invent ways to navigate through our problems. (I recommend looking up those words if you don’t know them.) In other words, in a world where words do matter and do convince us that we’re not worthy or valuable or beautiful, Christina uses rhetoric to create reality, to give her audience a new “role” or new “performance” to try out. The “rhetorical view” Lanham describes helps us see what she’s up to in this song, even though she denies the role of rhetoric and language.
ASSESSMENT

This section includes four samples of student work beginning with C-level work and ending with A-level work. The samples are unaltered with the exception of standardizing the formatting. The comment box preceding each sample includes notes and reflections on the work. Following the student samples, the portfolio includes selected student responses to an anonymous survey about the assignment.

STUDENT SAMPLE 1: C-LEVEL WORK

Although this response begins to identify and apply course concepts fairly well given this early assignment, I encouraged this student to elaborate and expand on the explanations she/he provided and resubmit the response. I hoped to encourage students to develop their skills at developing their arguments and insights. Most C-level assignments did not include the specific citations and detail that this sample did. This student only identified one attitude toward or way of thinking about communication rather than exploring the tension that the first assignment and first few readings established.

“TELL ME IT’S REAL” BY K-CI & JOJO

Tell me it’s real,
This feeling that we feel,
Tell me that it’s real,
Don’t let love come just to pass us by …

Baby you told me that you love me and you’d never leave my side,
Through the bitter end, through the thick and thin,
You promised me baby that you wasn’t going anywhere, yes you did

Baby keep it real, let me know just how you feel …
I can’t explain the way you make me feel,
Every time that you tell me that you love me,
And you know you did, so many times...

This portion of the song “Tell Me It’s Real” by K-Ci & JoJo has a lot to do with what Lanham explains about reality throughout his “The Rhetorical Idea of Life. As Lanham explains, “man is an actor; his reality public...his sense of identity depends on the reassurance of daily reenactment” (4). Without his partner communicating to him that the love they share is “real”, that what they share together is not just something that has flit by in some moment long ago, their love would cease to exist altogether. He insists that she has told him that she loved him before, but without the reassurance that their relationship persists, it seems that it would never have existed. The “clarity” of their relationship is “a temporal phenomenon” (21).

He also goes on to say that every time that he hears what she feels about the relationship, he “can’t explain the way it makes [him] feel”, implying that he may just be asking her over and over what her feelings for him are because he wishes to imbibe on those feelings repeatedly because he finds pleasure in doing so, which is also reminiscent of Lanham’s statement, “…we play for pleasure” (5).
The singer is using the song to not merely ask his partner what the status of their relationship is, but to use a rhetorically “dramatic” means to reiterate the fact that their relationship has been and currently is a reality in order to derive some sort of personal enjoyment from its recapitulation.

**STUDENT SAMPLE 2: B-LEVEL WORK**

This response identified the competing ways of thinking and talking about communication in the same song. More detailed references and citations would have cemented the response as an “A”. The application in the second portion of this assignment becomes slightly wooly, but the student’s explanation was primarily heading in the right direction.

“UNWRITTEN” BY NATASHA BEDINGFIELD

I am unwritten, can’t read my mind, I’m undefined
I’m just beginning, the pen’s in my hand, ending unplanned

Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find

These verses demonstrate the rhetorical view of communication because Natasha is stating the importance of creating one’s self and how society has the ability to mold, direct and change its journey. She is stressing the capability we have as humans to make the most of our lives and that we can be whoever we want to be. This is similar to the “role playing” concept that Lanham discussed. We have the power to “write” our own story and we do this by interacting with others and choosing who we want to be depending on our audience and how we want to communicate with others in order to achieve a fulfilling, satisfying life.

Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten

This part of the song reminds me of the “serious premises” in that Natasha sings about how others do not have an effect on the outcome of an individual’s life and that only the person whose life it is should matter and no one should tell him/her how to act, feel, or speak. Lanham’s idea of the “central self,” which is a view that one is unshaped by the outside world, is prominent in this part of
the song. “These selves combine into a single, homogeneously real society which constitutes a referent reality for the men living in it” (Lanham 1). This more simply means that we should be independent from the influence of others in society and to focus on what we want and who we are apart from the rest of the general public. This song is describing that who says the “words on your lips” are the most important part of the communication and that “no one else can feel it for you,” so you must take control of your thoughts, dreams, ideas and make them known to the world with only your voice and not the interference from others.

STUDENT SAMPLE 3: A-LEVEL WORK

Although the final portion of this assignment goes astray in terms of concept application, the precision of the application and the attention to explanation and elaboration in the first two connections earned the student an “A.”

“IF I WERE A BOY” BY BEYONCÉ

If I were a boy
Even just for a day
I’d roll outta bed in the morning
And throw on what I wanted then go
Drink beer with the guys
And chase after girls
I’d kick it with who I wanted
And I’d never get confronted for it.
Cause they’d stick up for me.

Beyoncé’s song struggles between reality, and what it could be if she were to change it. In these parts of her song, she is conveying how she would act if she were actually a boy. This is how she explains reality to be. This identifies with what Lanham defines as the “serious premises” of communication. She depicts certain norms that males follow, which is all part of a set reality that exists. Males behave in these particular ways, fitting in to a “homogeneously real society, which constitutes a referent reality” (1). She depicts a specific persona and behavior that all men carry out. It comes with being a male. It suggests that every male is encoded with these characteristics to make them all alike. This represents the idea of a “central self” that exists in all men. It is a definite, “irreducible identity” (1). This unambiguous identity makes all men who they are, singled out as one uniform identity.

If I were a boy
I think I could understand
How it feels to love a girl
I swear I’d be a better man.
I’d listen to her
Cause I know how it hurts
When you lose the one you wanted
Cause he’s taken you for granted
And everything you had got destroyed
This section refers to the reality that Beyoncé hopes to create. She explains how if she were a boy, she would not follow these norms of reality, but reconstruct them. Since she believes that reality can be played with, as opposed to discovered, she is representing Lanham’s “rhetorical view” of communication here. She is not looking to accept that there is a set reality. Instead, this section is the new reality that she wants to “manipulate” (4). She is exemplifying Lanham’s “rhetorical man [as] an actor,” since she is looking to change what she once referred to as a reality (4). Through experience, she understands certain emotions. It is with these emotions that she has plans to redefine male norms.

If I were a boy
I would turn off my phone
Tell everyone it’s broken
So they’d think that I was sleepin’ alone
I’d put myself first
And make the rules as I go
Cause I know that she’d be faithful
Waitin’ for me to come home (to come home)

This section is following the “serious premises” of communication because it is a form of interpreting communication and classifying it as a norm. Beyoncé claims that if her boyfriend did not answer his phone, he has no other excuse but to say it was broken if he wants to cover up the fact that he has been cheating. It addresses problems of communication that we have been discussing since the first week of class. By simply not answering his phone, her boyfriend is sending a message. Whether it is true or not, a huge presumption is made based on this action (or should I say, lack of action).

STUDENT SAMPLE 4: A-LEVEL WORK

The final example went well beyond the expectations of the assignment in terms of detail and application. However, I found that compared to a “standard” assignment (writing a one-page paper or short paragraph responses) students seemed to engage this assignment with a greater degree of thoroughness and detail as this sample showcases.

“MARIELLA” BY KATE NASH

I’m heavy handed, to say the least.
My mother thinks I’ll be an awful clutcher ‘cus I spill things from stirng them too quickly.
I’m far too loud.
It’s like, as soon as I’ve got an opinion, it just has to come out.
I laugh at stupid thin gs just ‘cause they tickle me.

I think that this line expresses something very close to the “serious premise” of communication. She’s blunt and concise about what she has to say, and doesn’t filter it, (she being Kate Nash in the song). Her way of communication is very straightforward, just as Lanham’s “serious premise”. She is her “central self”, and her communication is not swayed by anything around her, it simply is thought and said. This line is meant to tell the listener what she thinks is her problem, and that it is frowned
upon to speak your opinion. Lanhem talks about how Aristotle made certain how important the ability to persuade is, and so I think that this line completely undermines how powerful rhetoric can be.

And sometimes, sometimes, I wish I was like Mariella, she got some pritt stick and glued her lips together.

**So she never had to speak, never had to speak, never had to speak.**
People used to say shes as quiet as a mouse, she just doesn’t make a peep.
She wanted to dress her baby in patterns and flowers, but Mariella just crossed her arms and so she cried for hours.
Mariella. Mariella.

My pretty, baby girl
Unglue your lips from being together and wear some pink and pearls.
You can have your friends ‘round and they can stay for tea.
Won’t you just try to fit in please, do this for me.
But Mariella just crossed her arms and walked up the stairs and she went into her bedroom, and she sat on her bed.
And she looked in the mirror and she thought to herself If I wanna play, I can play with me, If I wanna think, I’ll think in my head.

Most of what we have talked about as far as communication goes, involves what someone communicates being heard, but I think that this shows that communication can follow the same ideals, that Lanham has for the “rhetorical premise”, yet it doesn’t have to be between more than one person. Mariella represents the rhetorical view in that she does have ideas through communication; they are just in her head. She plays with words and knowledge, yet it is internal, and not external. At the same time I think that Lanham would have something to say about Mariella having a central self. She seems to have one so much, to the point that she has chosen to only focus on herself.

These lyrics are to show that who she is, singularly, is so much more important to her than who people want her to be (her mother), or who she is expected to be. Lanham says that “if people cannot get enough in real life, then they seek it somewhere else” (15), and I think that Mariella has found that something else, in herself.

At school, Mariella didn’t have many friends, yeah, the girls there, they looked at her and thought she was quite strange.
Boys aren’t really into girls at that age.
And the teachers, they thought Mariella was just going through a phase.
But Mariella just smiled as she skipped down the road because she knew all the secrets in her world.
yeah, she always got the crossword puzzle right every day and she could do the alphabet backwards, without making any mistakes.
Mariella.

Happy in her own little world
Happy in her own little world

I think this tries to show that we don’t need to try to fit in with everyone else in order to be happy. We can be happy, being and doing whatever we want. Lanham expresses that we make reality what it
is through communication. We mold it, and grasp it in many different ways. Mariella grasps her own reality, and is happy in her own reality just as so.

“This also helped because I was able to relate to something I know well (music).”
“I was able to bring my life into what we were learning about.”
“I liked this assignment. It helped by applying course concepts to music of your choice so I feel it was a beneficial assignment that people could have enjoyed completing.”
“This was a great assignment. It was a great (and easy) stepping stone to looking at more difficult communication ideas.”
“This assignment started off looking like ‘a joke.’ I thought it would be easy to do and get done. However, I found that it took me a while to pick a song that accurately demonstrated something we had talked about, so I had to ‘play’ with the ideas to get them to match lyrics, and vice versa. I ended up liking the assignment despite it being the lowest of my HW scores.”

A small group of students disliked the open-endedness of the assignment and found the task of selecting a song (which I intended as part of the learning experience) to be daunting. Despite the sample I provided for students, some students expressed confusion over how to complete the assignment.

“For me it was really difficult to come up with a song that would suit the material we were learning.”
“Thought it could have been interpreted in many different ways.”
“This was one of the first assignments and it was hard to understand the concept. Maybe explain it more.”
“Though I don’t mind the idea of repeating this, I would have probably done it a little differently now that I think I understand the instructions better.”
“It helped me understand the concepts but it was difficult to choose just one song to explain a concept.”

**ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION**

A primary motive behind this assignment was to create a “learner centered” environment that allowed students to start with “the conceptual and cultural knowledge” they bring to the material in order to construct “bridge[s] between the subject matter and the student.”\(^2\) I hoped that students would see early in the semester that the concepts we developed in class were present in everyday discourses and that the students were already participating in the “debates” and exploring the tensions about communication and rhetoric.

For many students, I believe this assignment was a success. Because music is a central feature in so many students’ everyday experience, they enjoyed the opportunity to apply course material to such an integral and meaningful part of their lives.

For a few students, however, it seemed that the assignment did not advance their learning or understanding at all. As one comment indicated above, it seemed like several students saw the assignment as a “joke” where anything goes—as if any song and any explanation would suffice. One comment above suggested that the lyrics could be interpreted in too many different ways. One way I might improve this assignment is to be more explicit in how to evaluate the lyrics when selecting a song.

One drawback for this assignment (like the previous example) is that I asked students to perform a fairly complex analysis early in the semester when the concepts were still very new and students did not have a high level of comfort with the material. I believe it would be valuable to revisit this assignment later in the semester and ask students both to re-analyze their first song choice and to select a new song that they believe better expresses the different ways of thinking about communication that we developed throughout the semester. Not only would it allow for more nuanced analysis, but it would likely provide encouragement and reward when students recognized the depth and scope of their learning.
CONCLUSIONS

Overall, I believe these two assignments achieved the goals and outcomes intended and established a precedent for the type of thinking, learning, and connections that would come later in the course. However, I feel that I neglected to build on the success of these assignments throughout the semester because I continued to develop new formats and tasks in future assignments. Greater consistency in the style of assignment and work may have allowed students to pursue and develop with greater detail the connections among authors and course concepts. My approach this semester was to implement several different techniques; for example, I followed these assignments with a concept / author grouping activity and a concept mapping activity. After completing the semester I believe that the range and variety of assignments allowed the students to explore different learning styles and techniques, but ultimately limited their full learning potential because they had to adapt to new tasks repeatedly. In my reflections on the concept connection assignment (the dialogue), I mentioned that I returned to this activity for a quiz assignment and the student submissions improved. I may explore ways to turn this dialogue or playwriting activity into a larger, multi-step assignment that students develop throughout a semester or unit. With a more consistent and sustained focus on this learning exercise, I would expect to see marked improvement in students’ ability to make complex connections among authors. (I believe the same would be true for a consistent series of concept mapping activities.)

Likewise, I followed the song lyric application activity with a similar activity involving movies and a larger project that asked students to apply concepts to any cultural text. Again, I speculate that greater consistency in application would help students better develop their conceptual understanding. Throughout the semester I aimed for breadth of concept application, but perhaps a narrower range of cultural texts and examples (selected by individual students) would have allowed for more nuanced and richer application by the end of the semester. Overall I was impressed with students’ responses on the concept application assignment discussed in this portfolio, but I felt that the students did not progress as far as I expected based on their submissions for this early assignment.